

**Utah State Office of Education
American Indian Education Task Force
Statewide Indian Education Plan
2003**

Executive Summary

“If we lose this generation, we lose the past”
Leland Pubigee (NW Band Shoshone elder)

Introduction

The authors of this report spent countless hours researching studies and reports pertinent to Indian education, sharing our thoughts debating them, and painfully arriving at this document, a document that would normally require at least one year compiling. Approximately 65 people representing tribal leaders, tribal educators, state and federal education program representatives (Title VII Indian education coordinators) prepared this document. Several working groups were jointly formed representing the following areas:

- Early Childhood;
- K-12;
- Career Awareness/Guidance and Counseling;
- Higher Education;
- Community/Parental/Tribal Participation;
- Self Esteem, Cultural Pride and Native Language; and
- Adult Education.

The Most Significant Findings

Utah lags far behind (first finding). Other states, including Idaho, New Mexico, Arizona, California, Montana, Minnesota, to name only a few, are years ahead of Utah in addressing the needs of their American Indian constituency. These states have mandated changes in their social studies core curriculum, counseling programs and other state agency programs. These states have recognized the advantages of cooperation, and in some cases, jointly managing, operating, and funding tribal and community based schools and colleges.¹

The second finding shows social dysfunction is operating at different degrees within the individual, families and communities statewide, and these dysfunctions are the outcomes of years of social and educational oppression. One national study recently revealed both a high percent and large ration of young American Indian people at risk for substance abuse (41-82%), and further, (35-75%) of these youth were also the victims of violent, and/or sexual crimes before the age of 12 years old. Utah Tribal communities continue to point to the failed economic and educational systems on or near the reservations as a source of the many problems. They contend that if these were repaired both educational and economic systems, the quality of life for the Utah American Indian youth would

¹ [Social dysfunction] will continue regardless of any amount of unilateral input of economic, educational, and other resources from outside the reservation.

greatly improve (See Utah State Office of Juvenile Justice: Utah Division of Indian Affairs: Tribal Youth Empowerment, 2000-2002).

The third finding is that the authors of this report believe an opportunity now exists for our state to set an example for the rest of the nation. All stakeholders need to be involved from this point forward. Each partner has the capacity to take of the responsibility for the education of the Indian youth. Together we can take advantage of recent changes in federal educational policy.

Partnerships

It has been the observation of the authors of this report that in the past, we have blamed and victimized each other for the problem-the schools blamed the children and their parents, and the children and parents in turn blamed the schools. We have learned that we must stop the blaming game. We must stop blaming because we have learned that schools really can make the difference. Besides the home, only the schools are the safest place and most powerful source of influence for positive change to occur in the lives of each student.² We have learned that for American Indians in the State of Utah, social dysfunctions are real and have a major impact on education and what happens in schools. Again, we have learned that the schools are the first institutional front to counteract social problems.

What has become clear to us, in our deliberations, is that the answer lies in partnerships! Partnerships between the schools and all facets of each student's community can make the difference in each Indian student's life and in the quality of their educational experience. For students living on an Indian reservation, this partnership may need to be formalized via intergovernmental agreements. For others, it may not require such formalities. Nevertheless, a partnership of some kind between the schools and the Indian communities must be established, entered into, monitored, evaluated and modified as necessary.

Sovereignty

Utah's American Indian tribes are very protective of their sovereign rights and their political relationship with the U.S. Government and its subdivisions (states). We have learned that some expectations between tribes, State and school districts. We are recommending that the State of Utah welcome and enter into these agreements in recognition of the tribes' unique status and in recognition of the importance of partnerships. For a better understanding of sovereignty, see the explanation of tribal sovereignty "The Legal and Political Status of Tribes" by Larry Eckohawk – (See Appendix).

History

A brief review of history tells us that these problems can be overcome-American Indians have been effectively educated in the past and they can continue to be educated. The history of Utah's American Indians reveals that they are strong, independent and self-

² Tri-Ethnic Center for Prevention Research, Colorado State University (2002).

reliant Nations of people.³ Their economies consisted of agrarian, hunter and gatherer of food sources. Our broad research has found examples of instances where American Indians, i.e. the Cherokees, were better educated than their non-Indian neighbors.⁴ Unfortunately, for the most part, our examination has led us to believe that Indian people are still suffering from and have not healed from the North American conquest, nor the violent struggle to settle Utah, predominantly by members of the LDS Mormon faith. We find that when it comes to education, it will be important for American Indian people to better understand their past, begin to heal, and once again believe in themselves, locate and utilize the sources of strength that once enable them to survive the harsh conditions of living in the intermountain west. A revision of the state social studies curriculum will therefore be necessary in order to provide a more accurate understanding of Utah History and U.S. Indian history. It is critical that this action be undertaken as part of the healing process for not only Indian but for non-Indian people throughout the State of Utah. See Appendix-Cuch.

Problems

First of all, the authors of this report find it very important to state that there is really nothing wrong with the average American Indian student, including their parents. For the most part, the American Indian students in the State of Utah are intelligent and just as capable as any other student. Secondly, when it comes to problems, it must be recognized and accepted that cultural differences have and continue to exist. It is therefore incumbent upon educators of Indian children to understand cultural differences and how they impact the educational experiences. Our examination indicates that problems in education are systemic both in and out of school. Many problems are the result of social and psychological dysfunction in the Indian communities. We have found evidence of an “Inter-generational Post-traumatic Syndrome” a condition that is related to a failure to make the transition to modern living as a result of not internalizing what has happened in our tragic past. This condition has manifested itself in many forms such as widespread alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, suicide and other major community problems. The outcome of the above is poverty, hopelessness, and self-destructive behavior. American Indians begin to resume behaviors commonly associated with poverty and what is referred to as the “culture of poverty”⁵. From this cycle of poverty, cycles of educational failure then become a “way-of-life,” as the Indian child repeats the cycle of failure experienced by their parents. These issues continue today,

³ A History of Utah's American Indians. Edited by Forrest S. Cuch. Utah Division of Indian Affairs. State of Utah. USU. 2000.

⁴ Robert Howard Skelton as his dissertation in 1970 wrote a comprehensive history of the Cherokee education system: *A History of the Educational System of the Cherokee Nation, 1801-1910* (Ann Arbor: UMI).

⁵ Cultural of poverty asserts that poor people, have different ethics and values systems than most middle class persons, whereas critics of the culture of poverty thesis believe that the cultural, social and ethical behaviors of the poor have been modified over time to deal with the situational stresses of poverty, and does not reflect a basic broken value or belief system.

and will need to be addressed through education, and by agencies outside of the educational context.⁶

Our examination of the merits of early childhood education reveals the importance of loving teachers and teachers with a nurturing attitude. Indian parents have a right to expect qualified teachers with this nurturing attitude. We have found that sometimes this nurturing attitude is lacking in the rural school systems serving many Indian youth. Further, Indian parents and school officials equally have a right to expect qualified, committed, and caring educators to be present throughout the various grade levels of the public education system.⁷ This means that the teacher of the Indian student: 1) *will not* be racially prejudice, 2) *will be* professionally trained, 3) *will have* an understanding of the important educational issues facing American Indians; and 4) *will have* a commitment to respect the language, values, and culture of the American Indian student.⁸ In some cases, it will mean a comprehensive retraining of teachers of Indian children.

Finally, when it comes to ensuring a successful educational outcome for the American Indian youth, we have uncovered a paradox. We all understand that functional families are the single most essential determinant for healthy youth. For the American Indian youth, successful education environments are the second most critical factor for student success. Peer, or cluster influence, was the least likely factor to impact negatively upon the American Indian youth. However, since many of the basic social structures necessary for functional family operation have been destroyed by decades of assimilation efforts. The Indian communities will have to help remedy these ills in the immediate future and give them the priority considerations they deserve.

In summary, the recommendations I have emphasized are:

1. Sovereign Relationships & Intergovernmental Agreements
2. Curriculum Changes
3. Meaningful Data Gathering
4. Retention Strategies
5. Tribal Participation in Educational Policy-Making
6. Adult Education
7. Educator Professional Development
8. Community, Tribal and School Partnerships

⁶ DeHoyos, Genevieve. "Mobility Orientation and Mobility Skills of Youth in an Institutionally Dislocated Group: The Pima Indian. Indian Affairs (No.5) (1971). Brigham Young University, Provo Utah.

⁷ "Teaching Through Traditions" by Linda Skinner. In Next Steps: Research and Practice to Advance Indian Education, edited by Karen Cayton Swisher and John W. Tippeconnic III. 1999. ERIC, Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools. 105-134.

Communities once taught these values: they can be again today. These shared values include: 1) generosity and cooperation; 2) independence and freedom; 3) respect for elders and wisdom; 4) connectedness and love; 5) courage and responsibility; 6) indirect communication and noninterference; and 7) silence, reflection, and spirit. (Page 122)

⁸ "Cultural Perspectives on Indian Education: A Comparative Analysis of the Ute and Anglo Culture" Forrest S. Cuch. *Equity and Excellence*, Vol 23 No. 1-2 Issues 133-134 (1987). The University of Massachusetts, School of Education Quarterly.

